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## "What Time Is It?"

Hugh Hardy

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# “What Time Is It?”

Hugh Hardy

“What Time Is It?”<sup>1</sup> considers a malaise I have about the relationship of preservation to contemporary architecture. Each of the projects presented here (with the exception of the last), was tailored for approval by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. Whether rejected or accepted, each therefore bears an historicist approach to architecture. Correctly, none stands independent of its physical or cultural context. None attempts to be regarded as a pure object, isolated in time and place. But when taken in chronological order they present a trajectory of ideas which moves from confrontation to slight-of-hand invisibility.

Time is not about numbers. It is about relationships. What does 6:45 *mean*? Numbers themselves are not the point. Relationships among heavenly bodies tell us what time it is. For instance, the time of day is about where the sun is in relation to this planet. But if you're a fisherman, time is related to the tide and the gravitational pull of the moon. We are now all located at the end of the 20th century, poised on the rim of its last decade. But what time is it in architecture? For some, it depends upon what style it is. Do the mock Roman grandeurs of contemporary high-rise buildings or the painstaking triumphs of preservation and restoration suggest the past is our future? I believe that is a false frame of reference.

Time also has a lot to do with memory. Dali played with this in his *Persistence of Memory*, the painting with limp watches. Everyone knows the difference in time

before and after an anticipated event, and Dali was certainly correct to connect memory with distortions of time. In 2001 there is a great poignancy when the computer, Hal, loses his memory. Even though a villainous machine serving punishment, the slow erasure of his memory has great pathos, rendered all the more compelling by a futurist setting. Preservation shows that the cultural memory of architecture is as profound a part of the present as contemporary need.

Preservationists claim, correctly, that old buildings form an absolutely vital part of our identity because they are the cultural memory that tells us who we are. John Ruskin wrote in 1849, speaking of buildings of past times, “We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow.” But not all cultures respond in the same way. At the sacred Shinto shrines of Ise in Japan, for instance, the devout see preservation differently. In order to keep alive the idea of what these shrines represent they are demolished every twenty years, cut into small pieces, sent out as souvenirs to the faithful, and re-erected on an adjacent patch of gravel. Ceremonies are held to celebrate what the new building represents, but it is now necessary to preserve the physical fabric of the shrine because the building is only a symbol of the Shinto ideal. What is important is the ritual of the religion itself. *That* is what is preserved, not physical form. How different this concept is from



Ise Shrine — Japan

our concern for “original fabric,” so necessary to restoration projects.

Until recently the work of architects assumed a sort of closed, predictable future which reflected an imagined, perfect social order. Now we have fragmented buildings celebrated for their ambiguity. But the making of a building, even a Deconstructivist one, remains an ordering process. Architects cannot avoid the necessity of imposing order. It is intrinsic to our work. Even a vision intent on bringing disorder to the world requires an ordering process. I was taught that architecture *should* be complete, should be ordered to produce discrete, finite objects. But the speed of change has made this almost impossible. The fragmented nature of contemporary reality in fact suggests that all buildings are but fragments

of a larger concept.

Architecture for me has always been about the resolution of opposites. Like opera, it is a wondrous, implausible combination of aspirations. You can never achieve the perfect building (or opera performance), although you can sometimes come very close. While there are few truly great buildings, the number of conflicting choices required to produce a piece of architecture make even the modest accomplishments of a good building astonishing. Architecture requires choice. For instance, money and ambition seldom match. And what building completely resolves the problems inherent in the differences of perception between inside and outside? Conflicts between utility and aesthetics are more often masked than confronted. But despite all this, the

great game of architecture attempts to come as close as possible to resolving the contradictory ambitions and requirements inherent in what we do.

Architecture primarily remains a visual experience. Whatever else is attached to its presence by cultural or political moves, its power lies in a direct response to what one sees. But it is influenced by other perceptions as well. Technology, how things work and go together offers a second realm of appreciation. Call this functionalism if you will, it represents a fascination with the physical fact of construction. Buildings provide shelter, and must survive the rigors of the natural environment. As they remain constant in structure they must also be responsive to the changing environment. As a result they have become filled with machines. These servants assist both their construction and operation. In fact, contemporary buildings would not now be legally habitable without them.

There is a third aspect of architecture. It is not currently fashionable, but one beginning to reemerge. It sees accomplishment measured by social purpose. In this view architecture is perceived as having value when put in the service of a new and better social order. The profession therefore becomes the vehicle for building a better community, a new and improved way of life. It is exciting to be a part of architecture at such a moment. Usually, this perception is at its strongest following periods of scarcity, but ironically, a period of unparalleled economic

growth in the 1980's has left our cities without housing, crumbling infrastructures, and an intolerable imbalance between rich and poor. Andrea Oppenheimer Dean in commenting about these inequities in *Architecture* calls it, "A Feel-Good Decade."

Cities are places of extraordinary contrasts. They are where the rich and the poor come together. They are places of fantasy. They are places of the most bitter reality, and in their exchange between the two, new ideas of social order are forged. That is what makes them so important to a democracy. In New York, we have had some practice in predicting the future. Two world's fairs have given us a good go at it. But in many ways, the 1939 World's Fair failed to predict our present world. Its symbolic core was the theme structure, containing a large model of Democracy. This presentation of a new urban order and its companion vision, Futurama, in the General Motors Pavilion were among the most popular exhibitions of the fair. Both held the idea that the future of America was bound up in the creation of new cities, and a new urban order. The fair was wrong. In fact, this new order has become a suburban order made possible by cars speeding down once futuristic highways. Suburbia has become the real contemporary America. This is where the middle class now wants to live.

But despite their increasing unpopularity, American cities continue to exist as built fact and symbolic mecca. They con-



Penn Station Demolition



tinue to be a vital part of our cultural life, surviving as compelling myths for those in other lands and the cultural memory of our culture. Enormous and continual transformations — physical, social, and structural — lie at the core of the American experience. These changes are particularly dramatic in cities because a closely knit structure makes them readily visible. Even though strange for a place of such mythic dynamism, New Yorkers now complain about change. The public has become suspect of “improvement.” For the first time the perception of a diminished future has become characteristic of our society and it leads us to a fierce struggle for maintaining the status quo.

Instead of being home to what's new, New York has become a leader in the preservation movement. With the exception of the idea of transferring air rights to “save” landmark structures (an idea imported from Chicago), almost every legal aspect of the preservation movement has its origins in New York City. The event that got all this going was the demolition of Pennsylvania Station. There were earlier sentiments that something ought to be done to prevent the loss of important New York buildings, but when Penn Station was destroyed the preservation movement was born. Alas, the structure in those big, juicy coffee table books (photographed when it was sparkling new) is now memory. These images have a power that the actual building only held briefly. It soon became a vast and gloomy pile, possessing little of the romance found in photographic records. In a mere fifty years this legacy of the great railroad days became derelict and underused, a victim of the social and technological change which made such isolated, Roman grandeur irrelevant. Is it better to have it remain an inspiring memory or should it remain in fact “saved” as a glitzy shopping mall? Could fragmented elements of its ruined grandeur be incorporated as elements of a new “impure,” contemporary structure?

Landmark law is a reassuring buffer against change. It is something we could not now do without. But it is causing



Site for Langworthy House After Bombing

some peculiar distortions in our profession. First, preservation law says that a building is basically important only because of its aesthetics. Aesthetics takes precedence over use. Thus, the expression of life within a building becomes less important than the details of its appearance. The original aesthetics of landmarks are not to be disturbed, no matter what new activities they may contain. As a result of this schism there is a lack of relationship between outside and inside. You can do anything you want behind a landmark facade so long as you keep the outside pure. But the struggle to resolve conflicts between inside and outside is one of the characteristics of great buildings.

Our first project in New York which addressed the confrontation between old and new was a house on 11th Street, presented before the commission in 1969. This was our baptism about preservation issues. This was one of the first infill projects to come before the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission. Its origin came from counter-culture activities of the Weathermen in the 1960's. They were opposed to the existing social order, and their young middleclass dissidents manufactured bombs in the



Langworthy House

basement of this house and blew themselves up. One of the girls actually had her clothes torn off as the house fell down around her and vanished nude into the streets of New York. Nothing was left at the site except air and memories.

When these row houses were built in the 1840's they were all the same. In the course of time, however, each had been considerably changed. What does an architect do when confronted with a missing part of a larger composition? It seemed the logical answer was to put back together the elements of this street row, to treat this hole as a wound that needed healing. I thought that outside and inside should be directly related and used a diagonal plan which makes longer dimensions possible within the fixed limits of a rectangle. We could not cut new beam pockets without knocking the pictures off the walls next door, and therefore a new steel structure was inserted between the walls of adjacent buildings. All this fit nicely together: the steel structure, a diagonal plan, expressed by a bay window on the street, and a recreation of the top and bottom elements of the original facade. But, although it was approved by the Commission, this impure approach succeeded in making everyone angry.

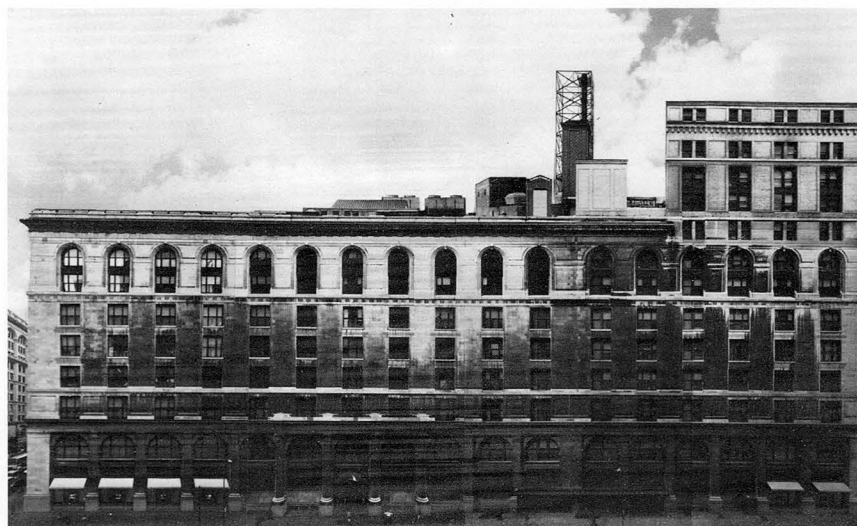
Preservationists were furious because this was not a complete recreation of the original. They denounced the bay window as unholy because it was obvious to them that it would have been possible to reproduce the *entire* original facade. The cornice, the stoop and its railing are in fact copied from other houses down the street. (The railing even reproduces a place in the ironwork where in the 19th century you scraped the horse manure off your feet before climbing the stairs from the squalid streets. This is contemporary nonsense, but there it is, completely recast, a rejuvenated memory of the nineteenth century.) Modernists found the diagonal bay appealing but thought everything else chicanery. They rallied against “fake stoops” and “bogus cornices.” They claimed the design was outlandish and contrived. For them it should have all been a completely contemporary design, an “honest” expression of its time. Purity ruled at each end of the ideological spectrum.

B. Altman's Midtown Centre was presented to the Commission in 1987. This is a key structure in the history of Fifth Avenue, which began its transformation into the international shopping boulevard we know today. Our premise in

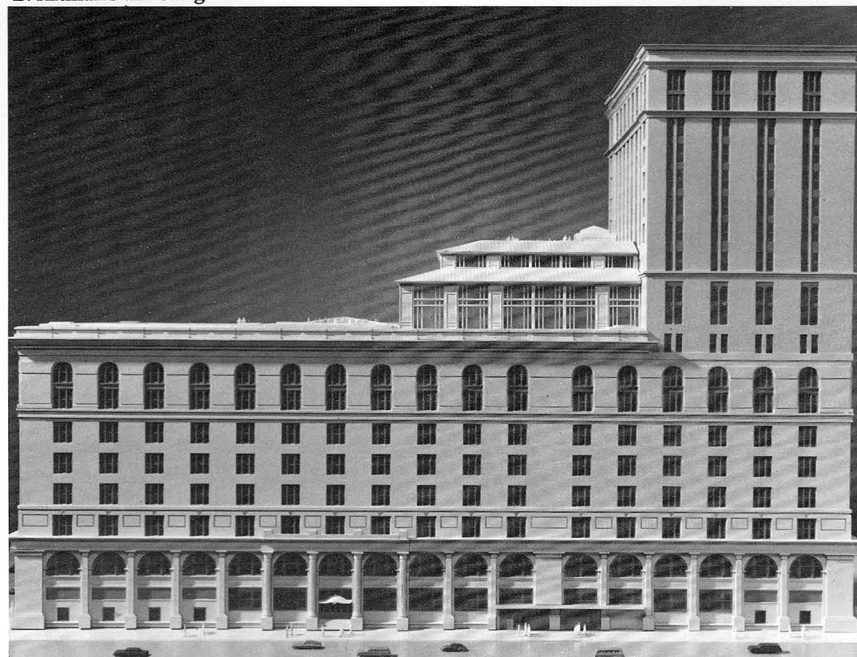
this design is that the existing building stands incomplete, and our proposed composition, accepted by the Commission, is intended to complete the work of other architects long dead. As it stands now, Altman's is not what the original architects, Trowbridge and Livingston, intended. This is not only because of the changing city around it but because of changes in the physical condition of the building itself. To face his Renaissance palazzo Altman used the finest French limestone. But alas, it cannot survive in the severe climate of New York. The building therefore suffered some dramatic changes during the 1930's when it lost many of its original details and Indiana limestone substituted for the crumbling French product.

The building was built in three stages, and the final addition by Trowbridge and Livingston included five stories on Madison Avenue raised above the main cornice line. These floors consisted of accounting offices, dormitories, a cafeteria, and other employee amenities. As a result, the facade facing east is composed in a different way than the facade facing west, and both have been considerably altered. Our scheme requires the addition of six more floors on top of the Madison Avenue facade and internal alternations which make this a mixed use structure. Competition with places like Bloomingdale's (where the amount of retail income per square is vastly greater), means that Altman's can no longer afford to maintain a nine-story tall, block-long building. For Altman's to survive as a department store it needs to be compressed into five floors from nine. Above this, floors are used for commercial office space?

The Commission is philosophically split in two on the subject of relating new to old. Whether new designs should be seen clearly in opposition to the original as the work of a contemporary architect or deliberately integrated with the original is a matter of faith. Our project for The Plaza Hotel was therefore equally unsettling when presented to the Commission



B. Altman's (Existing)



B. Altman's Proposed 34th Street Facade

in 1989. This 19-story, profiled block was built in 1907 as the "world's most luxurious hotel." It was intended to be so in every possible way, and immediately became a phenomenal, popular success. The most aristocratic and socially well-appointed people stayed at The Plaza, and this in turn lured the general public to its less stately bedrooms. The wealthy came with their servants, and a vast retinue of trunks. They stayed in ten-room suites overlooking the Central Park. They partied, and found life wonderful. The less fortunate had rooms facing the court with a bath down the hall. The current

owner, Donald Trump, wants to see the life of luxury restored. He wants to again create a glamorous life of excess. However, with the current affluent population in this city and the amount of money now floating across international waters, the word "luxury" has taken on new dimensions. Mr. Trump must both restore and transform The Plaza.

This building, too, has been changed. The original plan, by Henry Janeway Hardenburg contained 350 rooms. 300 more rooms were added in the 1920's by Whitney Warren, together with a ball-

room and presidential suite, a new entrance was carved into a series of dining rooms off Grand Army Plaza. This became a major access point for Fifth Avenue. It is interesting to note how Whitney Warren's addition was stylistically copied from Hardenburg's, only made flatter. (Much of the architecture in the twenties was flatter than the buildings which inspired it.) The surrounding context is also much different than the original; not just the physical context, but the social context which requires an escalating set of amenities to still offer "the world's most luxurious hotel."

Donald Trump's idea is to take the great asset of the hotel's traditions and location to create new suites of rooms (two stories tall in some cases), with grand pianos, monster television sets, hi-fis, jacuzzis, and everything under the sun that could be counted as luxurious. So behind the great mansard roofs, where servants used to sleep and steamer trunks were once stored, he found space to create fourteen extraordinary new suites. These would be accessible though private elevators with the same sort of cache that benefits the Waldorf Towers. But how to take all Hardenburg's profiled roofs and relate them to new uses in such a way that no one can tell the difference?

This rather unusual design premise assumes the work of a contemporary architect is intended to be *invisible*. It is justified by using history and photographs and original drawings to show that the changes either cannot be seen or cannot be remembered. Can you tell the difference between these two views? I cannot believe how many hours were spent in our office (and later in community discussions) or how agonizing was the Commission's deliberation. These changes involve matters of principles which go to the root nature of preservation itself. Is it the purpose of the Commission to freeze the city in time? Is this approach appropriate or feasible for commercial buildings? Can the Commission regulate change and see the building adapted in a sympathetic way? Publically (and legally), the Com-



mission says it accepts change, but there is considerable pressure from preservationists who promote the idea that the purpose of The Landmarks Commission is to *prevent* change. In point of fact, many of the Plaza dormer windows are larger in this design, and some have been added. The mansard roof has been lowered three feet, and subsequent roof top additions have been combined into a low, paneled pavilions. Can you tell the difference?

This final project was not presented to the Commission. I doubt it would have been accepted. It is The Brooklyn Academy of Music's Majestic Theater in Brooklyn. The theater was built at the turn of the century, just after Brooklyn became part of New York City. It was where shows tried out before crossing the river to Broadway. Even some George Gershwin shows began here. Although a very well built building that speaks of prosperity and popularity, the Majestic has been through all the tribulations and transformations of its surrounding community. After live theater declined it became a movie house for a while and then slipped down the exhibition ladder into blue movies. It next became a church, which preserved it until it was finally abandoned in the 1970's. Then for over ten years water leaked through the roof, transforming the interior, radically altering all surfaces. Our first flashlight visit was like a Jacques Cousteau movie. You felt as if you were descending underwater. There was also an unpleasant aroma, and no one dared step, even lightly, across the soggy floors. Decay had elegantly revealed layers of the Majestic's history. On top lay a moviehouse carpet with deco lightening bolts, covered with fallen plaster. Wall sconces hung on walls whose details spoke of church use. Beneath it all the original colors lay revealed. On these different surfaces you could read a story resonant with bygone life.

This environment was of great appeal to Peter Brook, an internationally acclaimed avant-garde stage director. The Brooklyn Academy of Music had invited him to stage his production, the *Mahabharata* in



The Plaza Hotel (Before)



The Plaza Hotel (Proposal)

New York. Central to this project was Peter's vision of an environment in which confrontation with the layers of time would form a provocative, thoughtful experience. Not intended as a celebration of decay, this solution represents a mixture of scenery and architecture: scenery because a considerable camouflage of new elements has been made, architecture because the audience-performer relationship has been fundamentally changed. The original theater had two balconies with a playing area behind the proscenium. Now the stage is raised almost a full story so that the first balcony becomes the orchestra level by sweeping down and enclosing a playing area in front of the proscenium. As a result, both

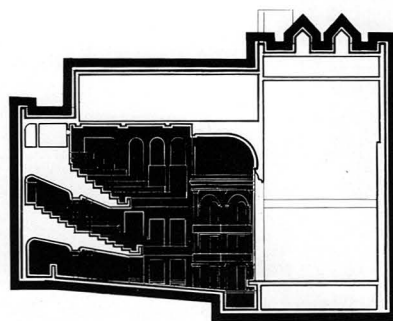
audience and performers, rather than being separated by the proscenium, are basically in the same room.

Although the theater's architectural configuration is drastically different than the original, its character and feeling remain the same. This building has been restored in the sense that it is restored to use, but not in the sense of an accurate recreation of an imagined original. In fact it is impossible to completely "restore" anything. Tom Wolfe was right, "You can't go home again." It is not possible to recreate the society that once used this building. There is no way that you could have on the stage the same type of performances, the same kind of illumination,

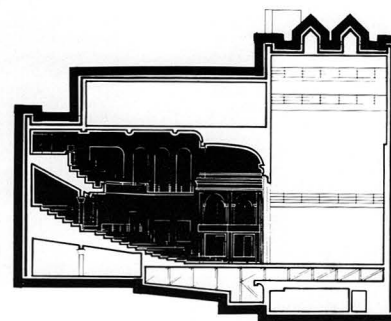
the same audiences, (nor would contemporary building codes permit its original provisions for life safety). All restoration must be an approximation of what once was.

Cultural memory is very much a part of architecture. Its power to evoke response is more profound than aesthetic theory. The idea of making buildings devoid of past associations is impossible. All structures relate to previous experience, to known cultural forms. Any assumption that the purpose of preservation is to preserve the physical artifacts as they originally were is doomed to approximation and the stately, inexorable process of decay. But like the shrines of Ise or Penn Station, buildings are important to cultural memory even when the original does not exist. Kept alive in the realm of imagination, they find their power not as objects but through the associations and aspirations they represent.

Clearly, there are many troublesome aspects of preservation which must be resolved as we go forward. What legacy does this generation leave as a result of its preservation efforts? One is the need to insure that fear of change does not pit the haves against the havenots. The humanistic values of earlier structures, which demonstrate the pride of building for benefit of the larger community rather than personal gain, should instruct us that need for betterment of all our citizens is as much a contemporary necessity as a past ideal. How can we speak in our own voice without destroying the work of others? If it is valid to respect the work of those who have gone before, does this mean we must practice architecture so that the virtues of a dead architect are held up as superior to those of live practitioners? The architectural proof of what people can build when technology, aesthetics and social purpose are joined with certainty remains astonishing. We have not lost our ability to inspire those who come after us.



BAM Majestic Theater SECTION · BEFORE



SECTION · AFTER



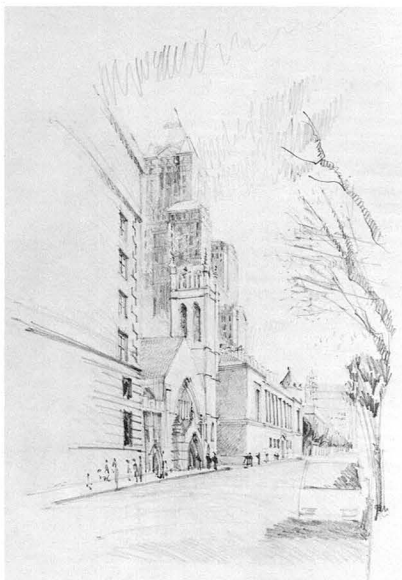
BAM Majestic Theater After

#### FOOTNOTES:

1. At its core, "What Time Is It?" represents my struggle with a set of historicist projects HHPA has been asked to design, all of them in New York. It results from a series of lectures given in 1989 which, (through examples from HHPA's work) considered the impact of preservation upon architecture, it is also an outgrowth of a previous lecture on this subject entitled, "Weaving A Dead Man's Clothes."
2. Landmark law essentially pertains to views from the public way. It is the public life of the streets that Landmark Law is intended to enhance. Therefore even the addition of a 47,300 square foot rooftop pavilion was not particularly controversial because it is all but invisible from the street. If you carefully compare the two elevations, you can see that the two top floors of the existing building have been refaced as part of a new composition. This design is really a hybrid between what Trowbridge and Livingston first put together, subsequent changes and what we now have proposed.
3. An example of new superimposed over old is the New York Historical Society, presented before the Commission in 1983 and rejected. The original building, by York and Sawyer, built in stages, is reserved and stoic in its classicism. Our challenge was to add a 23 story residential tower, using the Historical Society as a base. All zoning requirements had to be observed so that this could be as "as of right" building, which needed no zoning variances. The width of Central Park West, the narrow side street, the neighboring Museum of Natural History and the profiled apartment towers along Central Park West offer an extraordinarily diverse set of opportunities for relating new to old. Preservationists again rejected it as all wrong and a "dangerous precedent" for other landmark properties. Their disapproval reinforced the assumption that landmark structures must remain pure regardless of changes without and within. (Rejection of this design also had a lot to do with powerful people who lived in the buildings next door, savvy lawyers who did not wish to lose their views of the Park).

#### PHOTOGRAPHERS:

Ise Shrine, Site for Langworthy House; Hugh Hardy.  
Penn Station Demolition; Norman McGrath.  
Langworthy House; Cervin Robinson.  
N.Y. Historical Society, BAM Majestic Theater;  
HHPA.  
B. Altman's Existing and Proposal; Stephen Barker  
The Plaza Hotel; Peter Maus.  
BAM Majestic Theater After; Durston Saylor



New York Historical Society<sup>3</sup>